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ABSTRACT

In 1998, Connecticut's Public Act 98-243 mandated the development of an individual 3-year reading plan to address at-risk students, literacy instruction, professional development, and to forge stronger links with students' families. District reading plans were submitted to the Connecticut State Department of Education to be utilized as a rich data source documenting the variety of strategies, initiatives, and programs in place to support students' early reading development. Additionally, these plans document the professional development needs of individual school districts in the areas of literacy instruction. A teacher survey collected data on individual knowledge of reading development, instructional methods and strategies for working with at-risk readers. This paper describes a project to facilitate reading success by expanding the repertoire of assessment skills and comprehension and grouping strategies available to the participating teachers. The paper explains that the project also wished to offer field experience to graduate students in education at Saint Joseph College who were invited to work as substitutes for teachers attending workshops. It first presents project goals and then discusses assessment of student reading levels. It states that much of the training focused on developing alternative instructional strategies to help teachers acquire strategies to support students reading below grade level. The paper cites the implementation of a balanced literacy approach to teach reading and describes future plans. (Contains 15 references.) (NKA)

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Early Literacy Intervention Professional Development Program: Listening to Teachers' Voices

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Historical Background

In the summer of 1998 the Connecticut legislature enacted Public Act 98-243, An Act Concerning Early Reading Success, which focuses on supporting students' early reading development. The charge of this legislation was to develop an individual three-year reading plan to address at-risk students, literacy instruction, professional development, and forging stronger links with students' families. District reading plans were submitted to the Connecticut State Department of Education to be utilized as a rich data source documenting the variety of strategies, initiatives, and programs in place throughout the state to support students' early reading development. Additionally, these plans document the professional development needs of individual school districts in the areas of literacy instruction.

A team of teachers, language arts consultants, and administration from Edna C. Stevens School got together to engage in the creation of the state mandated three year reading plan. This team worked for a period of nine months to develop the Early Reading Success Plan currently in place at the school. During the dynamic discourse occurring at the initial group work sessions it was apparent that the team was unclear as to what types of reading professional development was needed for the staff at large. It was decided that a teacher survey would be constructed by the team that would collect data on teachers' individual knowledge of reading development, instructional methods and strategies for working with at-risk readers. The resultant survey provided information, which later served as the impetus to the creation of the reading plan and this project.

Teachers were asked to rate their familiarity and experience with a variety of reading strategies, assessment methods, and awareness of students' reading development. Survey results indicated that teachers did not feel that they were able to implement dynamic reading assessment, such as running records effectively. Additionally, it was evident that teachers throughout the grade levels were in need of professional development that would enable them to expand their skills as instructional facilitators in reading. For example, first grade teachers responded that additional training in guided reading was needed whereas fourth grade staff expressed interest in gaining additional techniques in developing students' comprehension skills. Based upon these results a program of consistent professional development in aligning student assessment and reading instruction emerged (Abdal-Haqq, 1996; Beall, 1999; Northwest Initiative for Teaching and Learning, 1999).

The professional development design employed in this project enabled teachers to work collaboratively, have the opportunity to implement techniques learned and discuss their experiences between training sessions, and, lastly, to work with teachers of different grade levels. This design necessitated additional funding not contained within the district budget; therefore a source of funding was sought externally. An Eisenhower Professional Development grant application was made on behalf of three district elementary schools and Saint Joseph College. Saint Joseph College was selected based upon the existing pre-service teacher professional development program in reading. This grant provided funding for training, substitute coverage for teachers, and materials that would extend and support participant learning.

Introduction: Project Description

The overall goal of this project was to facilitate reading success by expanding the repertoire of assessment skills and comprehension and grouping strategies available to the participating teachers. It was also the goal of the project to offer valuable field experience to graduate students in education at Saint Joseph College who were invited to work as substitutes for teachers attending workshops. In addition, special effort was made to invite teachers from Middletown, East Hampton and Regional District #13 to participate in the program.

Summer workshop collaboration

Teachers went through a process of training - practice -feedback - and further training (Abdal-Haqq, 1996) in the use of running records for k-3 teachers and miscue analysis for 4-5 teachers. Initial training session were conducted in March (56 teachers) and May (56 teachers) and a series of concentrated workshops in June (35 teachers) after school ended for the year. Teachers received training in the application of assessment data to various reading development strategies including guided reading, literacy centers and comprehension and vocabulary development strategies. The opportunity to use what had been learned in the classroom and then to receive feedback and further direction in the use of these techniques was a consistent and important feature of this project.

Project Goals

In order to help teachers make informed instructional decisions, this program focused on developing teacher reading assessment skills and the use of assessment data in the instructional process. When thinking about reading assessment, teachers were asked to consider the students' literacy achievements (products) and how students think about their reading and writing (process).

The project's goals called for teachers to:

1. *Engage in performance assessment of student reading levels as indicated in Cromwell's three-year reading plan.*
2. *Use the assessment data to develop flexible groups for instruction, including guided reading, literacy circles and other strategies.*
3. *Acquire strategies to support students reading below grade level as indicated in Cromwell's K-3 literacy plan.*
4. *Implement a balanced literacy approach through the acquisition of skills in assessment and literacy strategies to teach reading.*

Assessment of student reading levels

Initial training focused on providing opportunities to *engage teachers in performance assessment of student reading levels as indicated in Cromwell's three-year reading plan.* In order to achieve this objective, teachers received training in March in a wide variety of assessment strategies (Wang, Saunders & Kellenberger, 1998). The Letter identification, Word Test,

Assessment Strategies
Letter Identification
Word Test
Concepts About Print Test
Writing Vocabulary
Dictation Test
Running Records
Miscue Analysis
Teacher Observation
Think Trix
Anecdotal Notes
Cloze Procedure

Concepts About Print Test, Writing Vocabulary Test, Dictation Test and the Running Records comprise Marie Clay's Observational Survey (Clay, 1993) which is included in Cromwell's reading plan. The Observational Survey and phonemic awareness test are used the basis of k-3 assessment. For some the k-3 teachers, this workshop proved to be a validating refresher session in assessment. Teacher feedback is summarized in the following words:

> "I like learning about the entire observational study. It was informative to me how the running record fits into the whole observational model. I like how we can put the class together with those 6 components and look at the child as a whole."

Miscue Analysis (Vacca, Vacca & Gove, 2000) was the first (March) which opens the window to a child's reading processes was shared with 4-5 teachers. The majority of the feedback is echoed in the following words:

> "One thought I had...How product and process intertwine. How to examine what I am teaching. One feeling I experienced...How great it would be to make a break-through with certain students having reading difficulty. This will help. One step I will take...Practice on a student. Tape, record, analyze miscues, record data, make conclusions as to what to do next."

Majority of the participants indicated that they would try some form of miscue analysis before the next workshop having seen its value. In the words of one of the participants:

> "A step I will take is to use miscue analysis on 4 to 5 of my at risk students who are not identified as special education students. Hopefully from the information I

receive I will then be able to utilize the services of the special education and reading teacher and tutor and establish small groups to work on identified weaknesses."

In addition, teacher feedback indicated the need for an opportunity to practice and to absorb information given in training and further training in using assessment data. As one participant said,

" Once you know what the problem is, how do you fix it. Some training in the correction practices would be helpful..."

The May workshops were designed using teacher feedback data as indicated in the feedback summary and informal teacher discussion during the workshop, and addressed project objective #2. It became evident during the training of 4-5 teachers that teachers needed a greater variety of assessment tools other than miscue analysis. Therefore, the May session introduced teachers to Think Trix, Anecdotal Notes, Teacher Observation and the Cloze Procedure. These four strategies are incorporated into the instructional process and are perceived to be less of an add-on within the instructional day. Teachers were very enthusiastic and responsive to these strategies.

Flexible groups for instruction

Gr. 2 team moves closer to resources

The second focus of this project focused on teacher *use of assessment data to develop flexible groups for instruction, including guided reading, literacy circles and other strategies.* As evidence by the products of classroom

implementation such as lesson plans, teachers are using the assessment data to develop flexible groups (Cunningham, Hall & Defee, 1991; Taberski, 1998; Vacca,Vacca & Gove, 2000). for instruction. All k-3 teachers are assessing children using some form of the Observational Survey and the phonemic awareness test when appropriate. In addition, teachers perceive the need for flexible grouping and differentiated instruction as evidence by the following comments:

"An idea I had...(to) call less experienced children to small group shared reading (usually I do this whole group) instead of guided reading groups."

"...use 'real' guided reading format with my emerging kindergarten readers."

Teachers are also demonstrating engagement in some self-reflection and examination of their instructional practices. Participants stated,

"At first I felt overwhelmed but now I feel at ease because I already have been doing Guided Reading but not the silent reading. I was doing group choral reading."

"...CLOZE - philosophy and way to use it to determine reading level - independent, instructional, frustration. Didn't know it was set # of omitted words from each line."

"I enjoy the opportunity to discuss literature circles procedures and ideas with peers. I believe I got some extremely practical ideas today."

When asked in May, what steps teachers anticipate taking, their responses included:

"I'd like to use the story elements strips to review what was covered in the reading group and send them back with the area that wasn't brought up for reading responses."

"...to try a cloze for grouping sometime. Also, think trix has some possibilities I might be able to use before the end of the school year."

"I will use my last novel to help students develop questions/questioning skills using the wheel (think trix)."

We are planning to conduct a teacher survey to determine the extent to which the assessment and instructional strategies are being implemented this year. In addition, teacher will be asked to bring products of classroom implementation to focus follow-up discussion. It is anticipated that the results will be used to plan further professional development activities.

Support for students reading below grade level

As indicated in the table on the right, much of the training focused on developing alternative instructional strategies in order to help teachers *acquire strategies to support students reading below grade level as indicated in Cromwell's K-3 literacy plan.*.

Teachers in grades k-3 developed literacy centers and guided reading proficiency (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996, 2001; Hurst, 2000; Wang, Saunders & Kellenberger, 1998) while teachers in grades 4-5 practiced comprehension & vocabulary strategies (Routman, 2000; Vacca, Vacca & Gove, 2000).

Grade 3 teachers collaborating in development of literacy center

K-3 teachers' feedback on the summer workshops shows their appreciation of the opportunity to work collaboratively on projects of importance to each grade level.

"The flexibility within program to develop own pace, the make/take activities, working as a team."

" It was great to have the time to brainstorm with colleagues and then more time to implement. I

loved the sharing at the end of session!"

"Our team accomplished a lot. We will enhance our program because of this!" Additional following the summer workshop shows the k-3 teachers have concerns about the educational consequences of guided reading and literacy centers and are seeking further collaboration opportunities as evidenced by the feedback. When asked, "What additional training would you like?" teachers replied,

"Staff in-service to continue developing literacy centers monthly as a grade level team."

"Seeing centers in progress."

"On-site visitations; staff in-service monthly would allow grade level teams to continue to develop literacy centers."

Grade 4-5 teachers developing reading comprehension strategies

Teachers in Grades 4-5 engaged in developing vocabulary and reading comprehension instructional skills using actual children's literature (Peterson & Gunning, 1998). Feedback indicates teachers are reflecting on the nature, purpose and power of the instructional strategies for future classroom implementation. The actual carry-over of the training will be examined in the follow-up sessions that are

scheduled for later in the year. However, the summer workshops appear to have been a success as based on teacher feedback:

"I enjoyed a variety of strategies presented. I can see some to use right away in Sept. with Gr. 4. Then, when I go back to Grade 3 next year, I can work on others and graduate to those that worked well in Gr. 4."

"Great handouts and graphic organizers. Emphasis put on students becoming accountable for their learning. Good range of topics studied."

"I like the wide variety of strategies because it allows me to try different methods with different classes. It's been my experience that different strategies work better with different groups as well as individuals and it keeps teaching more exciting."

Additionally, feedback shows that the 4-5 teachers have concerns about the educational consequences of implementing the vocabulary and comprehension development strategies and are seeking opportunities to refine and improve their use of these strategies and to integrate the language arts as evidenced by the feedback. When asked, "What additional training would you like?" teachers replied,

"Extend these activities and incorporate them into writing strategies."

"Follow-up next year to see how successfully ideas were applied to classroom."

Implement a balanced literacy approach

Implementation is on going this new academic year; therefore, it's difficult to judge the extent to which it is currently being done to *implement a balanced literacy approach through the acquisition of skills in assessment and literacy strategies to teach reading.* Products of classroom implementation evidence efforts to implement the

assessment strategies and literacy strategies. It is hard to establish at this time that teachers are actually using the assessment data to make instructional decisions. This cause and effect relationship has not been established objectively and is grounded in the 'common sense' approach to teaching. Administrative monitoring and frequent grade level meetings will be addressing this issue. An additional concern regarding time needed to adequately document students' reading development for utilization instructionally continues to be explored at grade level meetings and at inter-grade team meetings.

Evaluation Plan

The major evaluation measures include:

1. *Products of classroom implementation. Throughout the program, teachers will follow their workshop training with a period of time when they will apply what they have learned to their own classroom work, then will bring the products of those applications to the following workshop. These products will provide an opportunity for ongoing monitoring and evaluation.*
2. *Teacher feedback. Participants' reactions will be sought throughout the program, both as a means of adjusting the direction of the activities and of evaluating the value of activities to the participants.*
3. *Teacher evaluation for summer workshops.*
4. *Follow-up survey. The follow-up sessions in the fall of 2000 will include a teacher survey (to be developed) that will assess participants' use of the techniques studied; i.e., running records, miscue analysis, guided reading, literacy centers and other comprehension development strategies.*

As evidenced within this article, the first three evaluation tools were used in the development and implementation of this project. As stated earlier, a major feature of this project is the process of training - practice -feedback - and further training concept. The fourth evaluation tool is the follow-up survey that will be implemented this October and November. The results of the survey will be used to determine the levels of use of the strategies developed during the course of this project and to determine the next course of action which might included peer coaching, additional training, attendance to conferences, consultation with this presenter, modeling of lessons by various in-house peer experts, visitations to schools which are successfully using guided reading, literacy centers, and flexible grouping strategies. The final point is that the project will not be allowed to be displaced by other innovations but will be nurtured by all parties involved.

Conclusions

Over all, the program has been perceived to be a success by teachers, administration and the project director. However, two areas of concern did arise. The lack of participation of graduate students from Saint Joseph College and the minimal participation from teachers outside of Cromwell even though participation involved no cost to the district and the project was publicized.

With respect to the graduate students, once the call for participation went out it became evident that SJC graduate students are employed full time and were unable to avail themselves of this opportunity. One student did participate in light of the fact that

she substitute teaches in adjacent communities currently. We did extend the invitation to undergraduate students but they were unable to participate due to their course schedules.

With respect to the lack of participation of teachers outside Cromwell, we found no obvious reason for this development. Three teachers did participate on a consistent basis and their comments indicate that the project was well publicized but there seemed to be many other opportunities for professional development within each district; therefore, there was no immediate need to go out of district. Although this is disappointing, it is not an indicator of anything negative in that collaborations within the consortium continue as evidenced by the writing of a Goals 2000 Grant for parent training.

Plans for the Future

Participant feedback indicated project success was based upon the training-feedback-training model implemented. Teachers have expressed an interest in working collaboratively with colleagues to further support the use of assessment to inform instructional practice. For example, first grade teachers are exploring student assessment data and engaging in constructive dialogue regarding recommendations for instruction. This cooperative effort may result not only in teacher ability to plan appropriately for student needs but create a climate of continuous reflective practice. To support this endeavor a more formalized relationship with St. Joseph College is sought. Discussion has begun regarding the possible creation of a professional development school at Edna C. Stevens. This model provides increased opportunities for all staff to participate in the critical discussion of best practice in reading instruction.

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